

**Testimony of
Benjamin Blake, Mayor
City of Milford**

Government Administration and Elections Committee

RE: HB 6998, "AN ACT CONCERNING THE CONVEYANCE OF CERTAIN PARCELS OF STATE LAND."

Thank you for this opportunity to provide our voice of support for those portions of HB 6998 which relate to the conveyance of property to the City of Milford.

Milford's Open Space & Natural Resource Agent has identified certain parcels, once City-owned, for which we are seeking to re-acquire.

Over the past several decades, Milford conveyed municipally owned land at Silver Sands Park to the State, much of it at no cost, with the promise and corresponding expectation that the Department of Environmental Protection (now DEEP) would, in good faith, protect the environment, foster access to precious coastal open space, promote health and safety, and develop the site into a beautiful retreat for residents and visitors to enjoy. While improvements to Silver Sands State Park have been made, many of the explicit and implicit promises to Milford have gone unfulfilled.

Today, much of the area on the western portion of the Park resembles a dumping ground and has become a hot-spot for all sorts of illegal activity. With discarded car parts, home furnishings and industrial debris collecting within the vegetation that grows from cracks and craters in an abandoned asphalt road, the area has become a dangerous eyesore, plainly visible from the Walnut Beach Boardwalk the State and the City worked so hard together to construct. We have reviewed DEEP's Design Phase for the State Park with upgrades in its Fifty Year Plan, and nowhere in this design is there mention of cleaning up the blighted areas in question.

Since the State has taken over this property, the city street connecting Nettleton Avenue and East Broadway was decommissioned. While we do not seek to re-open the road as a cut-through for vehicular access to the general public, we do see this land as a critical gateway to coastal open space. Given the opportunity, we would like to create access points to the vast tracks of less-than-accessible public beach for which entry is presently being obstructed by the blighted terrain.

In the interest of public safety, we are seeking to take back ownership of particular parcels which provide emergency access so that patrol and rescue vehicles can deter, monitor and prevent the illegal activity for which the area has become known. As it stands now, no practical means of entry to these areas exist for police or emergency medical crews. The 1999 road closure terminated the direct route from points on either side of Silver Sands State Park and compromised emergency response times; the average response time from Monroe Street to East Broadway has increased by over three minutes. Improving response times is always one of the City's top priorities, as I am sure it is the priority of this Committee, and remains critical in the protection of life and property.

Milford's conveyance request is additionally spurred by DEEP's quick-moving, multi-million dollar construction project within the Park. While the City supports several of the proposed amenity upgrades which will enhance the recreational experience of visitors, we question many of DEEP's construction priorities and fear the construction's secondary effects on the shoreline habitat.

The City has met with DEEP on several occasions and expressed our concerns regarding its proposed design plans. For example, the City and the Army Corps of Engineers have suggested that before new roadways are asphalted into the Park, that DEEP consider incorporating "berming" and other green infrastructure to harden the coastline and fortify those adjacent neighborhoods devastated by recent storms. Indeed, we have advocated for building up areas of coastal retreat to enhance the resiliency of the surrounding shoreline neighborhoods.

The City has further recommended that before DEEP builds massive guard houses, dining facilities, and beachside administrative offices, it first restores the Park's natural environment by addressing the blighted and dangerous conditions which limit access for visitors and deteriorate the local ecosystems. The City envisions walking and biking trails, with stop-off areas for bird-watching and scenic enjoyment.

Most importantly, the City has asked that DEEP consider the local impact of a to-be-constructed toll at the entrance of Silver Sands. Quite frankly, we are troubled by the foreseeable havoc that will ensue with respect to traffic, parking and public safety in the streets and neighborhoods adjacent to the Park. Unlike Hammonasset or other State beaches where a fee is charged, Silver Sands is bordered on the North, East, and West by densely-populated neighborhoods. These crowded areas, with little to no off-street parking, already suffer severe traffic/parking congestion. A parking fee will only exacerbate the existing circumstances as beach patrons elect to locate their vehicles along city streets at no cost, rather than pay to park in the Silver Sands lot.

While the land surrounding Silver Sands Park is presently State property, its upkeep, maintenance, and environmental stewardship are a reflection on the City of Milford. To date, DEEP has not been interested in partnering with the City to address our concerns. If DEEP was willing to come to the table and work with Milford to protect the sensitive coastal environment, help ensure the safety of our citizens, and consider new resiliency efforts along our embattled shoreline, we would be happy to withdraw our request for this land conveyance. Unless and until that occurs, we respectfully urge you to approve the conveyance.

Thank you for your consideration of these matters.